DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 271 CS 502 041

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TITLE I Think We're Losing Our Minds.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association Conference (Chicago, Illinois, April 13-15, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cocurricular Activities; College Students; *Debate; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; *Public Speaking; *Relevance (Education); Student Interests
IDENTIFIERS *Forensics

ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate forensics training and experience are no longer relevant, nor do they provide a useful service for the participant. The irresponsibility of contemporary forensics has taken three forms: unbelievable growth in the number of forensic tournaments and events, the inclusion of too many individual and impromptu events, and an orientation toward nationwide tournaments. Through these three trends, forensics societies may have encouraged many students to engage in their activities and may have spent thousands of dollars, but they have lost their educational base and therefore their rationale for existence. (CC)

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I THINK WE'RE LOSING OUR MINDS

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Some five years ago, Professors Thomas Harris and Robert Smith assessed the rhetorical trappings of the forensics scene and reached this conclusion: "Intercollegiate debate has probably stirred more controversy than any other speech activity."[1] Events both prior to and following the publication of that statement have shown their rather broad generalization to be correct- academic debate is, somewhat ironically, the most hotly debated activity of our discipline. A plethora of articles and convention papers have described, assessed, and, in many instances, condemned contemporary intercollegiate debate practices. This writer has found himself in the thick of the battle in many contexts and on many occasions.[2] Happily, today we are not going to be concerned with what has become a boring rehash of the same indictments and defenses, the same strident pleas for reform of the debate circuit, the quest for sanity. That debate about debate will continue unabated in the future, continuing to prove that academics tend to shed more heat than light on any given issue.

Instead, today we are going to examine "forensics," a term that I shall operationally define as being "individual events" or all contest speech activities other than debate. I fully realize that a dyed-in-

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the-wool Aristotelian probably would suffer some type of coronary occlusion upon hearing my definition and then would rush to the closest copy of The Rhetoric to find that "forensic speaking" pertained to courtroom oratory. However, as will be detailed later, we are concerned with the way "forensics" has been defined on the contest circuit and not with any rational, time-honored definition of that weighty word. Forensic speaking today has no relevance to the ancient worlds of Corax, Aristotle, and Cicero. There is some relevance, however, to the ministrations of Hippias.

Before proceding to a critical analysis of contemporary intercollegiate forensics, it is essential that the question be answered that the title of this CSSA program presupposes: is forensics a sport? Webster's tells us that a "sport" is "any activity or experience that gives enjoyment or recreation." Thus, by the simplest of definitions, we can see that forensics is a sport. After all, those taking part must garner some type of enjoyment and/or recreation from the activity or they would not willingly spend all those hours in the backs of old station wagons on the road to such scenic spots as Muncie, Ypsilanti, and even Toldeo and Athens- two lesser cities in Ohio. Even by athletic analogy we can see that forensics qualifies as a sport. There are "teams" or "squads;" there are "coaches;" there are scholarships; and the wild spectacles called "awards assemblies" certainly indicate the near presence of cheerleaders. Yes, forensics is a sport. Rah.

However, forensics used to be more than mere sport, forensics used to be more than sophistic enjoyment or recreation. It used to be a lot more, and because forensics viability now must be seen in the past tense

we come to both the title and thesis of my paper- we are losing our minds. Forensics training and experience used to be relevant; at one time it provided a useful service for the participant. Now forensics is nothing more than fun and games, academic debauchery with all the trimmings. As Joe McCarthy used to say, it makes me "sick way down deep inside." What strikes me as ironic about the perversion of the forensics circuit is that so many of its coaches hold themselves to be superior educationally to their counterparts on the debate circuit. Many have been heard to proclaim most proudly that "I have nothing to do with our debaters. I am the forensics specialist." Rah.

There is irony in this in that contemporary intercollegiate forensics is making the same mistake that intercollegiate debate made in the previous decade, and the educational value of forensics competition has suffered significantly as history has so unfortunately repeated itself. After the demise of the West Point Debates and the development of the National Debate Tournament (NDT), the intercollegiate debate circuit went wild with growth. There were more tournaments and longer tournaments; quarter-finals gave way to octo-finals, and in some places even double octo-finals became the norm. The National Debate Tournament has mirrored this growth, doubling in size in the past ten years. While the quality of evidence presented and the depth of argument has improved, the quality of the debate interchange has declined as debate's goal shifted from one of educational advancement and enrichment to qualifying for the NDT. There is no doubt that this NDT-orientation has hurt intercollegiate debate grievously, because it has caused otherwise sane individuals to believe that being the national debate champion really means anything. The honor might be nice, but

the price that must be paid for that honor simply is too high.

Sadly, intercollegiate forensics has decided to follow the same mistaken path, a path taken by people who ought to know better. As noted before, forensics used to be relevant; it used to provide a valuable service for its participants. Now, however, intercollegiate forensics is best described by the words spoken one hundred years ago by England's Benjamin Disraeli: "the hare-brained chatter of irresponsible frivolity." This irresponsibility, advanced most haughtily by self-righteous forensics directors, has taken three forms.

First, there has been an unbelievable growth in both the number of forensics tournaments and the number of forensics events, a fact noted by Professor Jack Howe in Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, 1976-1977:

> [a] great revolution ... has occurred in forensics over the last decade. Lest anyone is in doubt, that revolution is the tremendous upsurge of interest in the individual events aspect of intercollegiate forensics. Not only has there been a dramatic vertical growth in the number of individual events tournaments in the past few years, but there has likewise been astonishing growth horizontally, as individual events tournaments have expanded to include veritable smorgasbords of competitive speech events, some of which would not even have been considered in the purview of speech contests a few years back. [3]

To demonstrate this growth more clearly, Howe's work provides statistical data to illustrate this so-called horizontal growth of offered events:

> ... in 1966-67, the largest number of individual events offered at a single tournament was 9.... During the 1976-77 season, 23 tournaments offered 9 individual events, 3 provided 10, 5 others featured 11, 5 more held 12 events, 2 tournaments featured 13, and the record, with 14 different individual events, was shared by 3 tournaments: Bradley University's "L.E. Norton," and Southern Connecticut's fall "Southern Hospitality" and spring "Owl" tournaments. [4]

While the growth in the number of individual events tournaments probably can be applauded (although this writer never has understood the rationale for separating debate and individual events into separate tournaments as has become the custom the past few years), the spiralling increase in the number of events offered is not nearly as positive. Somehow, the thought has developed that there must be some type of event for every personality quirk found on our campuses. We have to provide something for everyone; we must cater to the great unwashed. Often, we hear such growth justified on the grounds that we need more bodies in our programs to increase our budgets, but that is nothing more than face-saving rationalization. Quite simply, there are people on the forensics circuit now who have absolutely no business being there, people serving as cannon fodder for those whose skills warrant their presence. More and more events mean more scheduling headaches, more judging problems, higher expenses per tournament, and more cannon fodder for the forensics graveyard. We have come to learn politically, economically, and ecologically that "bigger" is not necessarily "better." It is time that our forensics directors woke up and learned the lessons of recent history, but trying to schedule fourteen events in eighty rooms over a two-day period makes it difficult for them to understand and cope with reality.

Second, and as a direct off-shoot of the first problem, contemporary intercollegiate forensics has been harmed by the many kinds of absurd events offered as part of its horizontal growth. Professor Howe wrote of "smorgasbords of competitive speech events," a most appropriate metaphor as both a wide array of food and events will cause heartburn.

Those of us who have argued that forensics was an important educational activity must shudder at the thought of "comic book reading" as a competitive forensics event, but such an event has been staged. Or consider this writer's pet peeve- improvisational pairs, an event without any redeeming quality whatsoever- as far as educational benefit is concerned. Now if you want to defend "improv pairs" as being a "fun" event, that is fine as no one enjoys fun more than this individual. However, if you want to have "fun," why not stay home, save the forensics budget, and play bingo at your neighborhood Catholic church? We used to advise our students not to make fools of themselves in public, but improvisational pairs institutionalizes foolishness. It is symptomatic of a system gone intellectually bankrupt.

Equally as bad has been the growth of various "impromptu" events during the past few years, events that mandate instant analysis of very complex issues and subjects. We have "impromptu rhetorical criticism," "impromptu oral interpretation," and "impromptu salesmanship," events that recreate the negative aspects of ancient Greek sophistry as style and slickness predominate over meaningful substance. In short, the myriad of forensics events has made today's individual events tournaments "Showtime U.S.A." with all the appropriate glitter. There is frivolity, there is laughter, and there is a great demonstration of loving camaraderie, but there is precious little educational value. It is truly the theatre of the absurd.

Finally, intercollegiate forensics has damaged itself by adopting a "nationals" orientation similar to those debate programs whose lives pyramid toward the National Debate Tournament. Since the debaters could

lay claim to a national championship, the forensics community decided to follow the same path. Hence, the National Forensic Association was created, complete with its annual NFA Championship Tournament wherein the national forensics championship would be decided each year. Rah.

Perhaps the most perplexing issue surrounding the formation of the NFA is that anyone would care. Does any compelling benefit spring from this NFA get-together? Are our lives immeasurably enriched by the presence of this forensics superbowl? Of course not. It is but another chance to orchestrate "Showtime U.S.A." and to allow forensics coaches to puff-up their expansive egos. The NFA does not exist to benefit students, nor does it exist to advance the sound educational purposes of sane forensics activity. The NFA exists to make forensics coaches feel important, to give them their shot at the limelight. It ought not to be so.

This NFA-orientation has become pervasive. "Qualifying for nationals" has become the rallying cry for forensics participation, for entering more events than is sanely prudent, and for attending tournaments throughout the country. No longer is forensics participation to be advocated for the student's benefit, no longer is the student the central concern of the forensics program. On the contrary, like the crazed fanatics who want to be "Number One" in college football or who must win the Super Bowl or World Series, the forensics community clamors to make the "Top Ten" at NFA Nationals and student interest be damned. An NDT-orientation has not been beneficial to intercollegiate debate; the NFA-orientation in forensics is having the same negative effects.

By definition and analogy, contemporary intercollegiate forensics must be considered an American sport, an activity whose purpose is enjoyment and/or recreation. Forensics has lost its educational base, it has lost its rationale for existence. Forensics glitters and shines, it has many students engaged in its many activities, and it wastes countless thousands of dollars each year that our institutions of higher education cannot afford to throw away. Yes, intercollegiate forensics is the "new American sport" and all of us should be saddened by the degeneration of this once-proud and once-relevant communicative exercise, by this "hare-brained chatter of irresponsible frivolity."

FOOTNOTES

[1] Thomas E. Harris and Robert M. Smith, "A Systems Analysis of the Current Debate Controversy," Journal of the American Forensic Association, IX (Winter, 1973), 355.

[2] See, for example, "What's Right/Wrong With Debate?" Debate Issues (October, 1977), a transcript of a program hosted by this writer at the 1977 CSSA Convention.

[3] Jack H. Howe, editor, Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, 1976-1977 (Long Beach, California, 1977), p. 1.

[4] Howe, p. 100.